



Commander, U.S. Pacific Command
USPACOM J01PA (Public Affairs Office)
P.O. Box 64031 | Camp H.M. Smith, HI 96861-4031

June 3, 2008

PRESS RELEASE 008/08

USS ESSEX GROUP/ 31ST MEU PREPARE TO RESUME PREVIOUS OPERATIONAL SCHEDULE

CAMP H.M. SMITH, Hawaii – The USS Essex group has been positioned off the coast of Burma since May 13th ready and able to deliver urgently needed humanitarian assistance to the victims of Cyclone Nargis, but Burma's ruling military junta has repeatedly rebuffed our offers to help. Therefore, the commander of U.S. Pacific Command, Adm. Timothy J. Keating, recommended to the U.S. Secretary of Defense that the USS Essex group and U.S. Marine Corps 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) should continue with their previously scheduled operational commitments June 5th. The Secretary of Defense approved this recommendation.

"Over the past three weeks we have made at least 15 attempts to convince the Burmese government to allow our ships, helicopters, and landing craft to provide additional disaster relief for the people of Burma, but they have refused us each and every time. It is time for the USS Essex group to move on to its next mission. However, we will leave several heavy lift aircraft in place in Thailand so as to continue to support international community efforts to deliver aid," Keating said.

The Essex ships will now head to the coast of Thailand to backload their remaining helicopters and personnel on June 11th. "However", said Keating, "should the Burmese rulers have a change of heart and request our full assistance for their suffering people we are prepared to help."

The United States government quickly responded after Nargis hit Burma on May 2nd. Since then, USAID and the Department of Defense, working closely with ASEAN, the United Nations and other non-governmental organizations, have completed a total of 106 airlifts carrying more than 2 million pounds of emergency relief supplies, benefiting at least 417,000 people.

(Continued)

Admiral Keating flew to Rangoon, Burma on the first U.S. military relief flight May 12th along with Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance and USAID Administrator Henrietta Fore. While there, Keating hand-delivered a letter to Burma's leaders offering additional humanitarian assistance with heavy lift helicopters and landing craft capable of reaching areas inaccessible by road, as well as water-making and purification capability, and medical assistance. He also extended an offer to the military junta to visit U.S. ships in international waters and to fly on U.S. military relief flights in an effort to help ease any concerns they might have regarding U.S. humanitarian assistance and intentions.

But to date, the forces and assets of Joint Task Force Caring Response, including the four-ship Essex Group, 22 medium and heavy lift helicopters, four landing craft, and more than 5,000 U.S. military personnel remain idle as the military junta in Burma ignores diplomatic offers of expanded humanitarian assistance to its people.

"I am both saddened and frustrated to know that we have been in a position to help ease the suffering of hundreds of thousands of people and help mitigate further loss of life, but have been unable to do so because of the unrelenting position of the Burma military junta," Keating said.

-- PACOM --

For more information, contact Lt. Col. David Griesmer at (808) 477-1341 or www.pacom.mil. After normal working hours, contact (808) 348-1734.